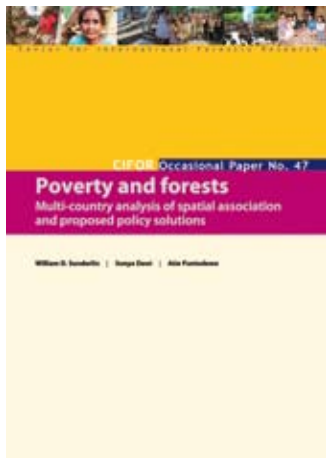




## Why forests are linked to poverty



During the past 15 years, Vietnam has had great success in lifting large numbers of people out of poverty. However, most have been living in or around urban centres, and poverty reduction strategies have barely touched heavily forested areas. “The number of people living in closed forests is numerically small, but the depth of poverty is greater, and so is the challenge of getting people out of poverty,” explains William Sunderlin, co-author of a CIFOR Occasional Paper which explores the links between poverty and forests in a range of tropical countries.

In Vietnam, Brazil, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda and Indonesia there is a detectable overlap between high forest cover and high rates of poverty. The researchers suggest that there are four principal reasons why poverty is associated with high forest cover. First, some forest dwellers live much as their ancestors did, in an almost cashless economy. Most measures of poverty would define them as poor or extremely poor. Second, forest dwellers tend to be politically and

economically powerless and have little or no say in formulating development policies. Third, forests tend to attract migrants and provide a safe haven for refugees, who themselves are sometimes poor. Finally, governments seldom invest in sparsely populated areas for the simple reason that they get greater value for their money by concentrating on more populous regions.

According to Sunderlin, formerly of CIFOR and now with the Rights and Resources Initiative, remoteness is a key factor, but remoteness alone cannot explain the extremes of poverty in many forest areas. “Almost all forest lands are owned by governments and local people have very few tenure rights,” explains Sunderlin. “The lack of tenure, or insecurity of tenure, limits people’s ability to improve their livelihoods and incomes.” Furthermore, the biophysical nature of some remote forest areas – far from markets, and steep-sloped with poor soils – means that incomes inevitably remain forest-based and conversion to agriculture can be difficult or impossible.

“The lack of secure tenure in forested areas limits people’s ability to improve their livelihoods and incomes.” William Sunderlin



Transporting litter from pine forests, Dai Lai, North Vietnam. (Christian Cossalter)

Co-author Sonya Dewi of the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) points out that many remote forest regions are blessed with abundant natural resources, such as timber and minerals. However, instead of enriching local people, this natural wealth often impoverishes them. “Areas where there is greater natural wealth often suffer from severe poverty,” she says, “and their situation is made worse by big companies which come to exploit the resources.” Billions of dollars have been made out of forests, but local communities have received few benefits from timber exploitation. Instead, they make a meagre living through small-scale agriculture and the collection and sale of non-timber forest products: enough to keep them alive, but not to prosper.

Economic growth alone is unlikely to improve incomes in remote forest areas, which is why intervention is essential. The researchers suggest four policy options to alleviate forest poverty. These include transferring tenure from governments to communities, improving market access, promoting community forestry and providing communities with payments for environmental services, such as the sequestration of carbon or watershed protection.

These are not discrete, either/or policy options. Frequently, they will go hand in hand. For example, tenure reforms will often be a prerequisite for improving markets and promoting community forestry. And local communities are unlikely to receive payments for providing environmental services if they lack secure rights of tenure to the land where the services are found.

The Occasional Paper points out that more research needs to be done. We know surprisingly little, for example, about the role which migration can play in helping forest dwellers to escape from both forests and poverty. Likewise, more needs to be done to establish precisely how community forestry can help communities and individuals lift themselves out of poverty on a permanent basis.

*Poverty and Forests* is one of two papers commissioned from CIFOR scientists by the World Bank, and its findings helped to inform the Bank’s policy research report, *At loggerheads? Agricultural expansion, poverty reduction, and environment in tropical forests*. This is widely considered the best synthesis to date of this complex issue.